

Country church takes root in upscale North Dallas

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DALLAS—A western-heritage church may seem out of place in North Dallas, sandwiched between one of the nation's most affluent neighborhoods and upscale NorthPark Center. But leaders of Highland Country Fellowship believe God planted the congregation there for a reason.

"The people here don't live in the country, but they own ranches or know people who do," Executive Pastor Kyle Carper said.

'Feels like family'

More importantly, people encounter something at Highland Country Fellowship they don't necessarily find right away at mega-churches, Teaching Pastor Bill Rector added.

"It's a friendly place where everybody knows your name," he said. "It feels like a family."



Members and guests from Highland Country Fellowship fill a venue at White Rock Lake in Dallas for an

event featuring country singer Rudy Gatlin. (Photo courtesy of Kyle Carper)

Highland Country Fellowship grew out of a merger between two congregations last fall—Country Fellowship of Dallas, a growing mission church that had been meeting in a barbecue restaurant in Richardson, and Highland Baptist Church, a long-established congregation that had occupied the property near University Park since 1993.

Worship Pastor Sammy Davenport planted Country Fellowship of Dallas with the help of Dallas Baptist Association and the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the blessing of sponsor church South Garland Baptist Church. Rector joined him as teaching pastor about a year later.

Initially, Davenport—whose musical background ran more toward classical, jazz and early contemporary Christian music than country—had his doubts about serving at a western-heritage church.

“I’m not a cowboy. I can’t find stirrups short enough to fit my legs,” he said. “Then I found out it really was about creating a church that doesn’t smell like, taste like or feel like a church.”

Urban cowboy church

Country Fellowship—which Davenport described as “an urban version of the cowboy church”—flourished. He noted a [Billboard Magazine article](#) reported 42 percent of the general population identify as country music fans, including half of the people with an income of \$100,000 or more.

By early last year, the church realized it had outgrown the space it occupied for Sunday worship. Then last summer, Davenport learned the barbecue restaurant’s management decided it no longer would make its

facility available, and the church had 30 days to find another place to meet. So, he contacted Dallas Baptist Association to explore other options.

At about the same time, Highland Baptist Church was approaching a point where its leaders and congregation faced hard choices. The church—formerly known as Highland Park Baptist Church—had moved in 1993 into the building formerly occupied by Fellowship Bible Church, but it had experienced steady decline for an extended time, said Carper, who became senior pastor in 2014 after several years as a member.

Carper and Davenport met in late July last year to see if Country Fellowship might rent space from Highland Baptist. By the end of their four-hour conversation, they instead began asking if God might be leading the two congregations to unite.

Carper, Davenport, Rector and their wives met together and realized in spite of the differences between the two congregations, their leaders had compatible visions for ministry.

Taking the Bible seriously, not themselves

Dallas Baptist Association had helped Highland Baptist create a Next Steps Committee to determine where God might be leading the congregation. So, Davenport met at length with that committee, and its members enthusiastically endorsed the idea of the two congregations uniting—even though Davenport warned them, “We may be too weird for y’all.”

Highland Baptist followed a traditional organizational structure and formal worship. Country Fellowship was much more informal and loosely structured.

“We take the Bible seriously. We don’t take ourselves seriously at all,”

Rector explained.

Even so, the two congregations successfully united last fall.

“We haven’t lost a single person,” Carper said. “In fact, we’ve had some come back who had left us.”

For the first time in 25 years, the church is starting to make an impact on its immediate neighborhood, rather than just drawing members from a distance, he added.

‘Never knew church could be like this’

At the same time, Highland Country Fellowship also has drawn worshippers from as far away as Bonham and Decatur—each about 70 miles distant from the church facility.

“People will drive to be with family,” Rector noted. “After all, how far will you drive for family dinner at Thanksgiving?”

Highland Country Fellowship has created a family feeling that puts newcomers at ease and make people feel welcome—whether they are traditional churchgoers, unchurched people or folks who dropped out of church due to a bad experience along the way, Davenport noted.

In spite of a bit of culture shock, former members of Highland Baptist have adjusted and embraced the new identity, Carper noted.

“I’ve had people say to me, ‘I never knew church could be like this,’” he said.